



The Kansas Rural Justice Initiative Committee Report

Laurel Klein Searles, Office of Judicial Administration
For Farmers' Sake-2025 KFU State Convention
November 18, 2025
Wichita, Kansas

Kansas Rural Justice Initiative Committee

- Established December 1, 2022
- Created through Administrative Order 2022-CM-081
- Comprised of Members from Across the State
 - Representatives from all three branches of government
 - Education leaders from law schools and prelaw programs
 - Community leaders from programs invested in rural Kansas and the legal community
 - Rural attorneys and judges from throughout Kansas

What did we do?

- Examined existing census, demographic, and attorney registration data.
- Conducted a state-wide survey of rural attorneys with a statistically significant response rate.
- Completed listening tours led by panels of practicing rural attorneys, rural judges, and community leaders in Great Bend, Dodge City, and Pittsburg.
- Performed law student focus group discussions and interviews at KU Law and Washburn Law.
- Collaborated with Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center at SMU Law and the KU Institute for Policy & Social Research to refine our data and perform GIS mapping.
- Brought in program directors to learn more about existing initiatives targeting shortages of licensed professionals in rural communities.



KANSAS
Rural Justice
Initiative

December 2024

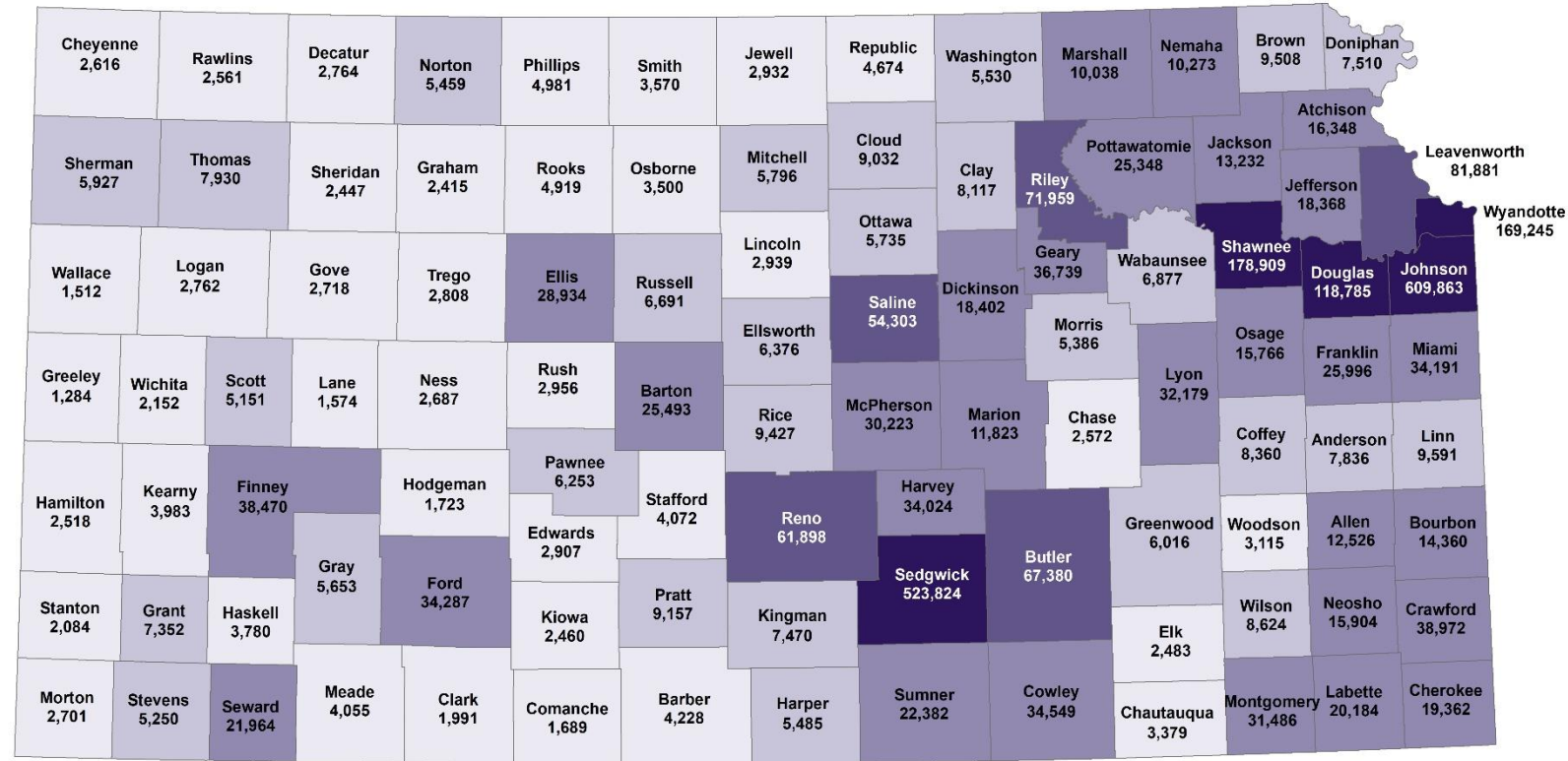
COMMITTEE
FINAL REPORT
to the Kansas Supreme Court

We released our report in December 2024. It contains key findings, and 10 specific recommendations to address attorney shortages across the state.

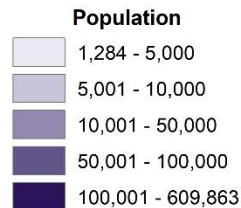


Access the Report

Total Population in Kansas, by County
April 1, 2020



Source: Institute for Policy & Social Research, The University of Kansas;
data from the U.S. Census Bureau.



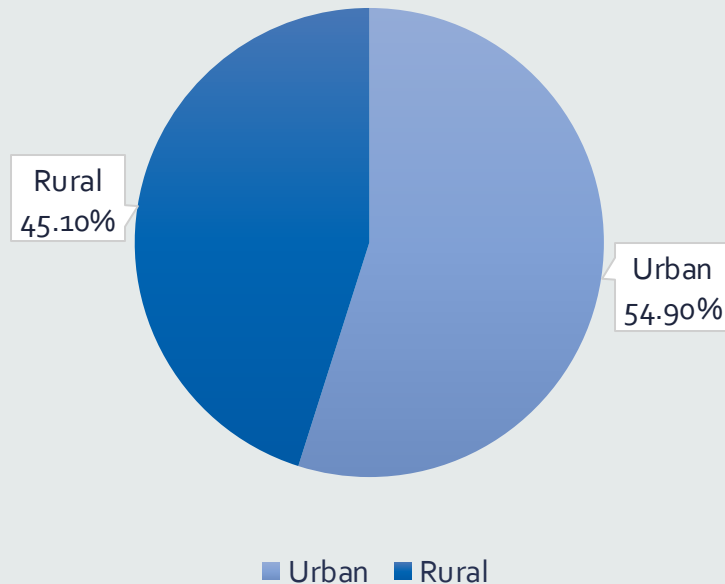
State: 2,937,880

How is rural defined?

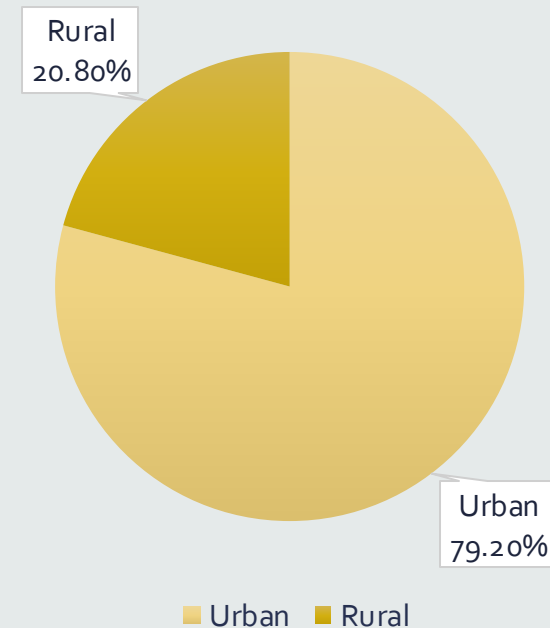
Rural Kansas includes all
counties but Douglas,
Johnson, Sedgwick,
Shawnee, and
Wyandotte.

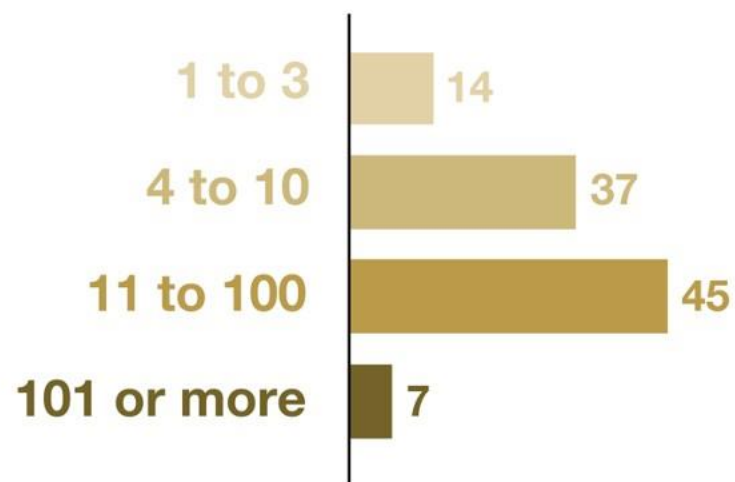
Kansas Population and Attorney Distribution

Kansas Population

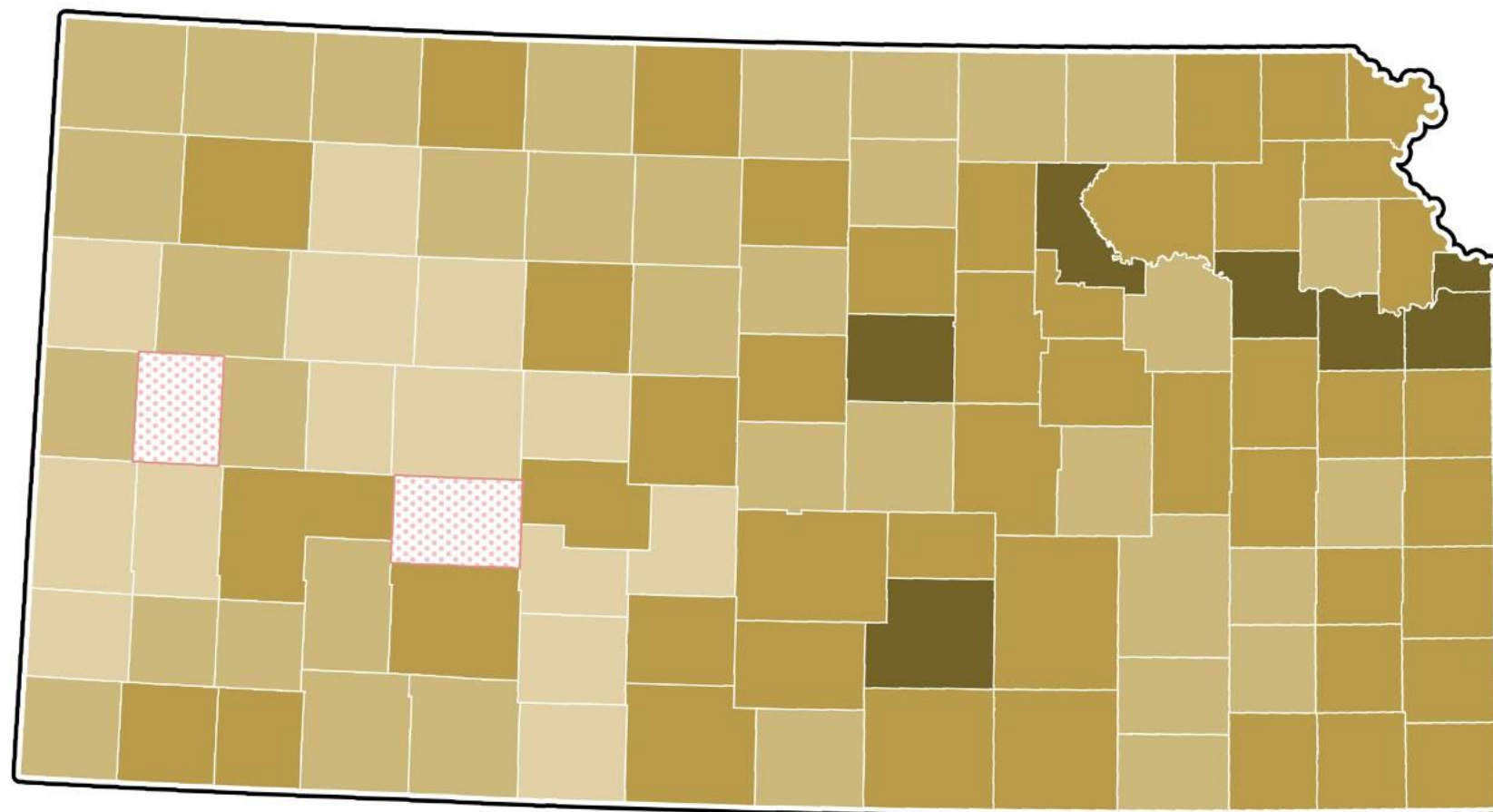


Active Attorneys Residing in Kansas

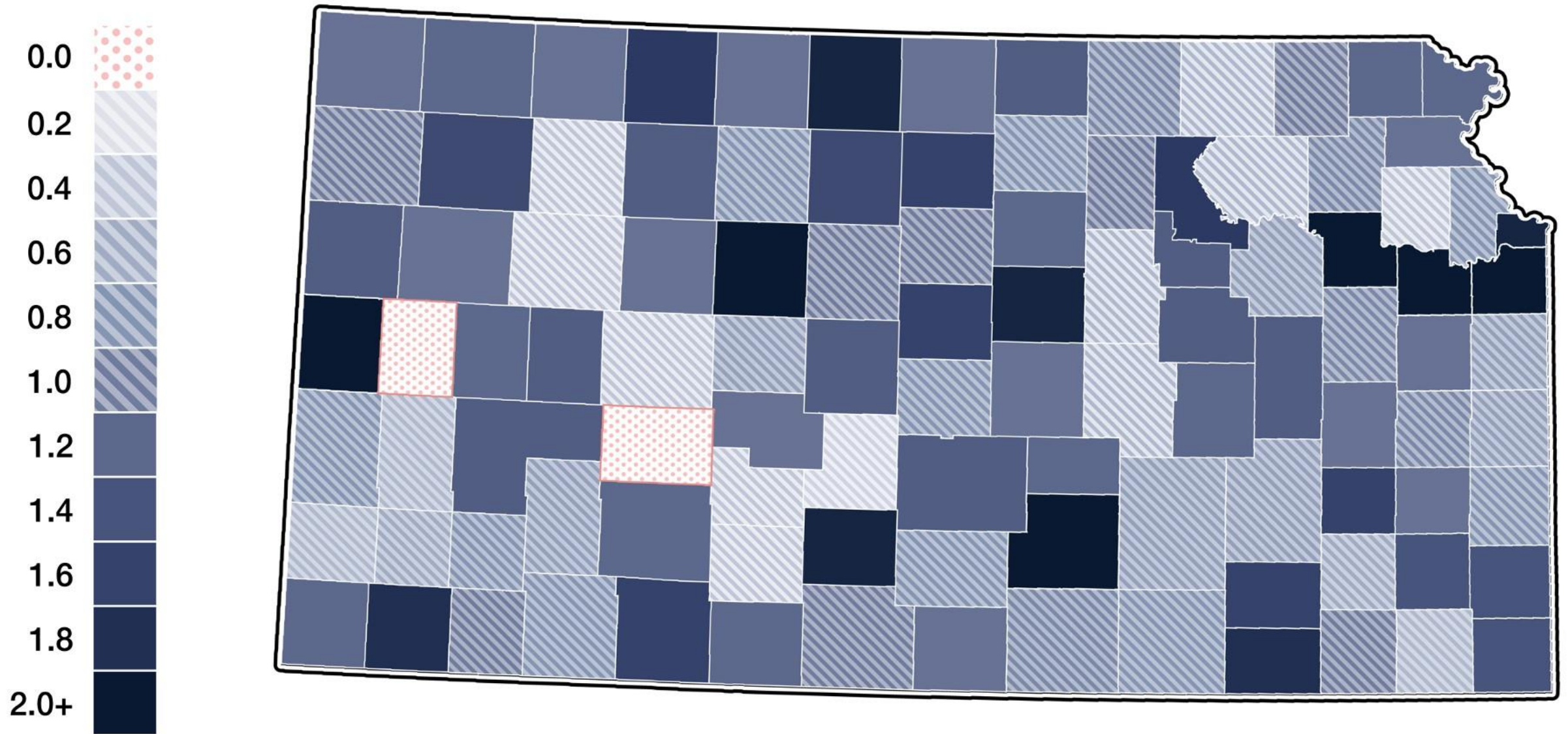




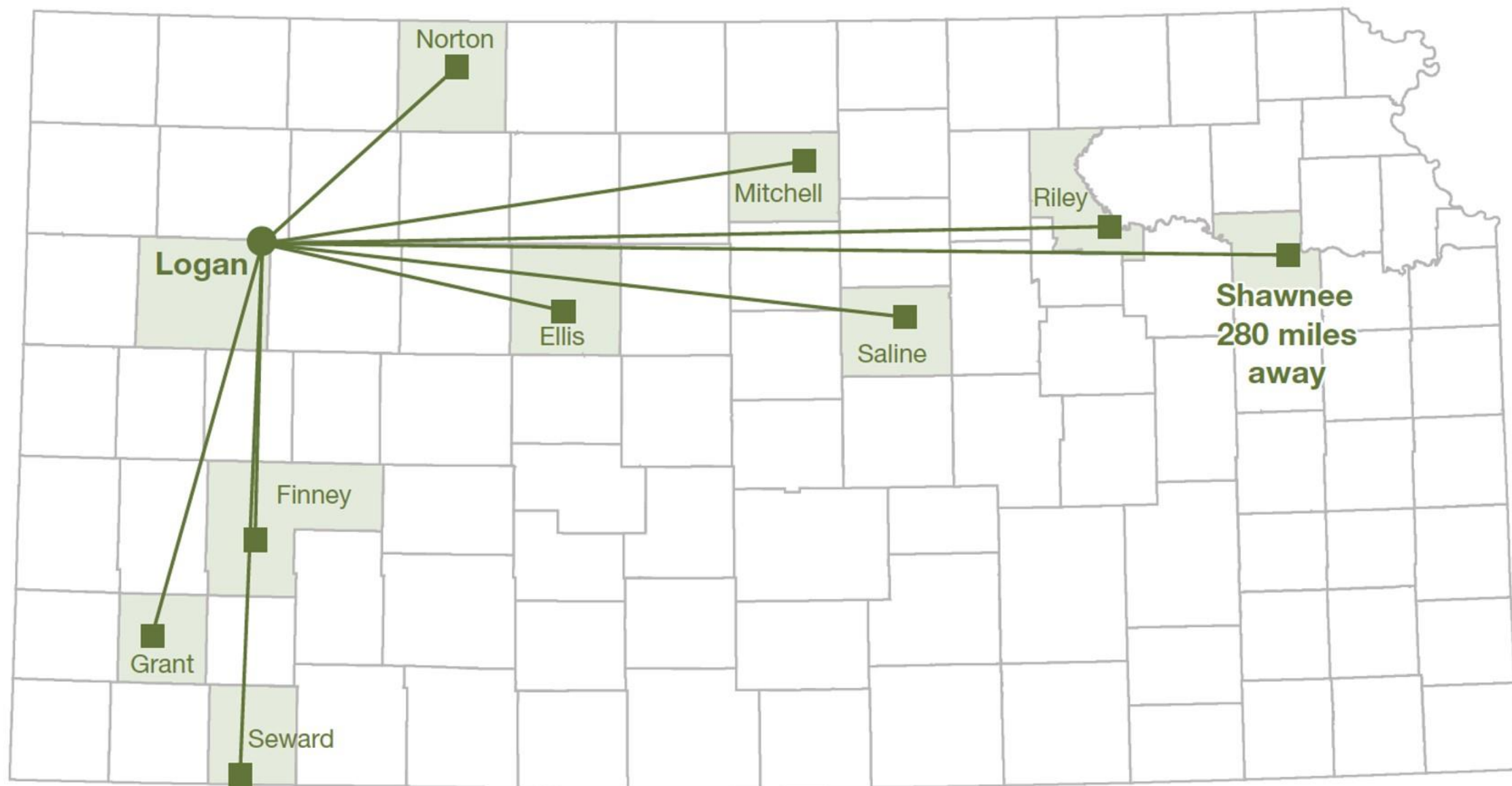
 **2 counties
with no attorneys**



Number of attorneys by county (2023)



Attorneys per 1,000 residents (2023)



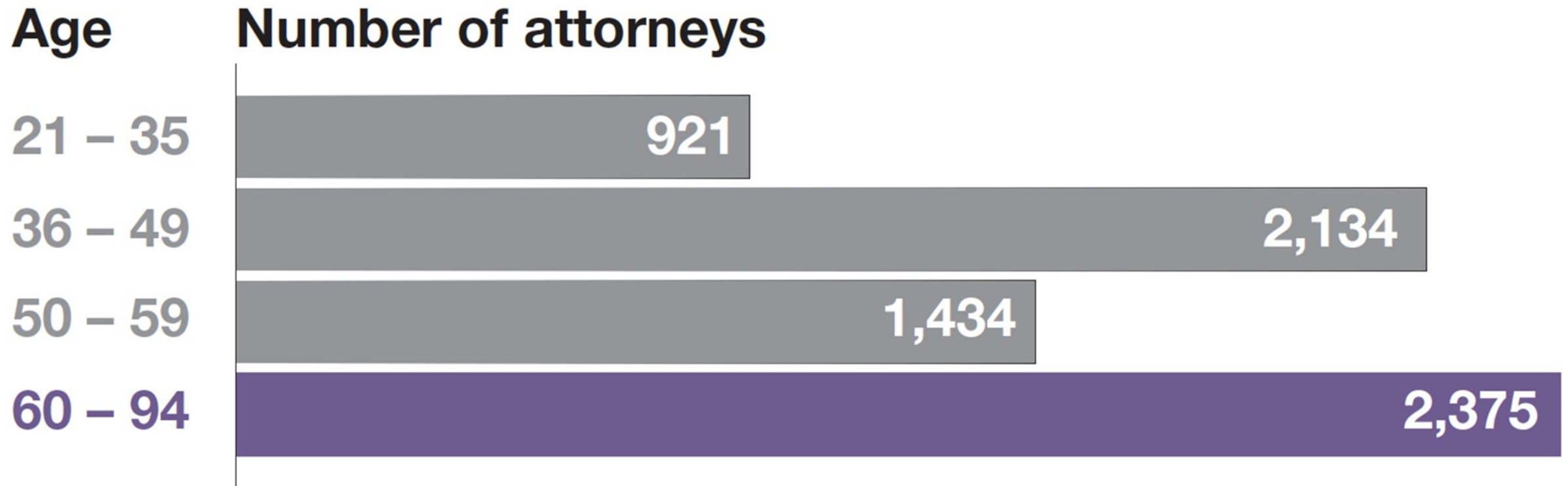
Median Age of Attorneys

United States	46
---------------	----

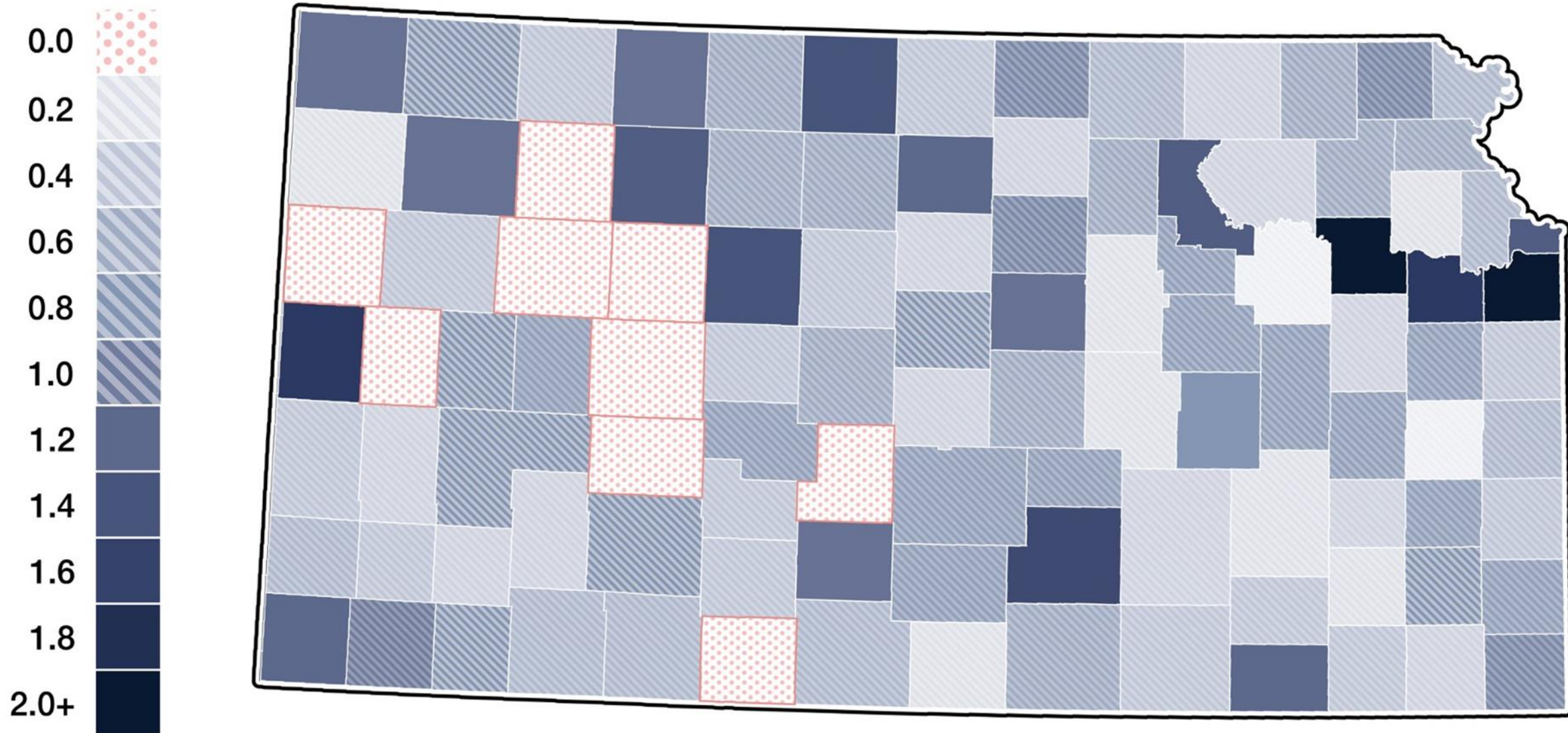
Kansas	51
--------	----

Urban Kansas	51
--------------	----

Rural Kansas	55
--------------	----

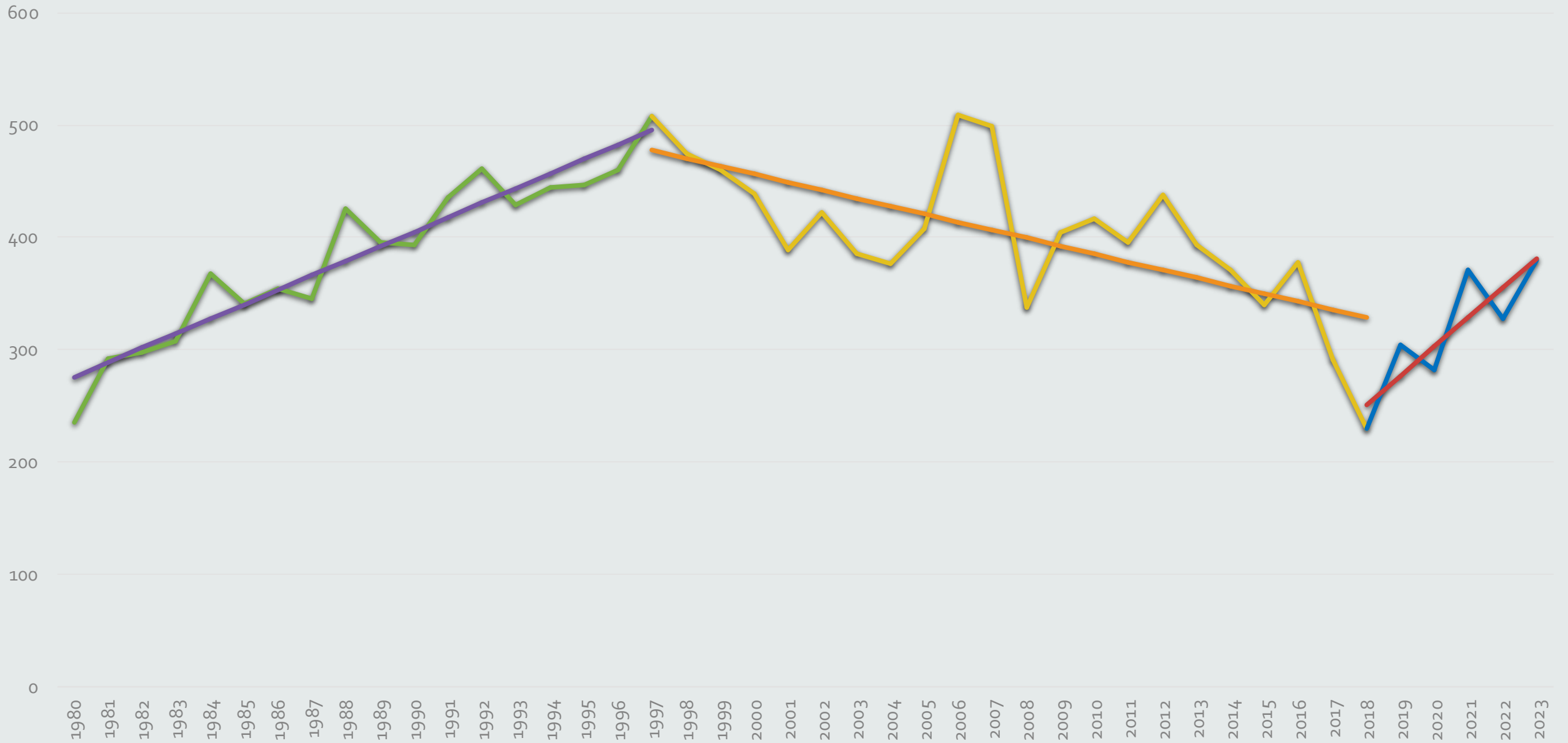


Source: Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center/KU Institute for Policy & Social Research

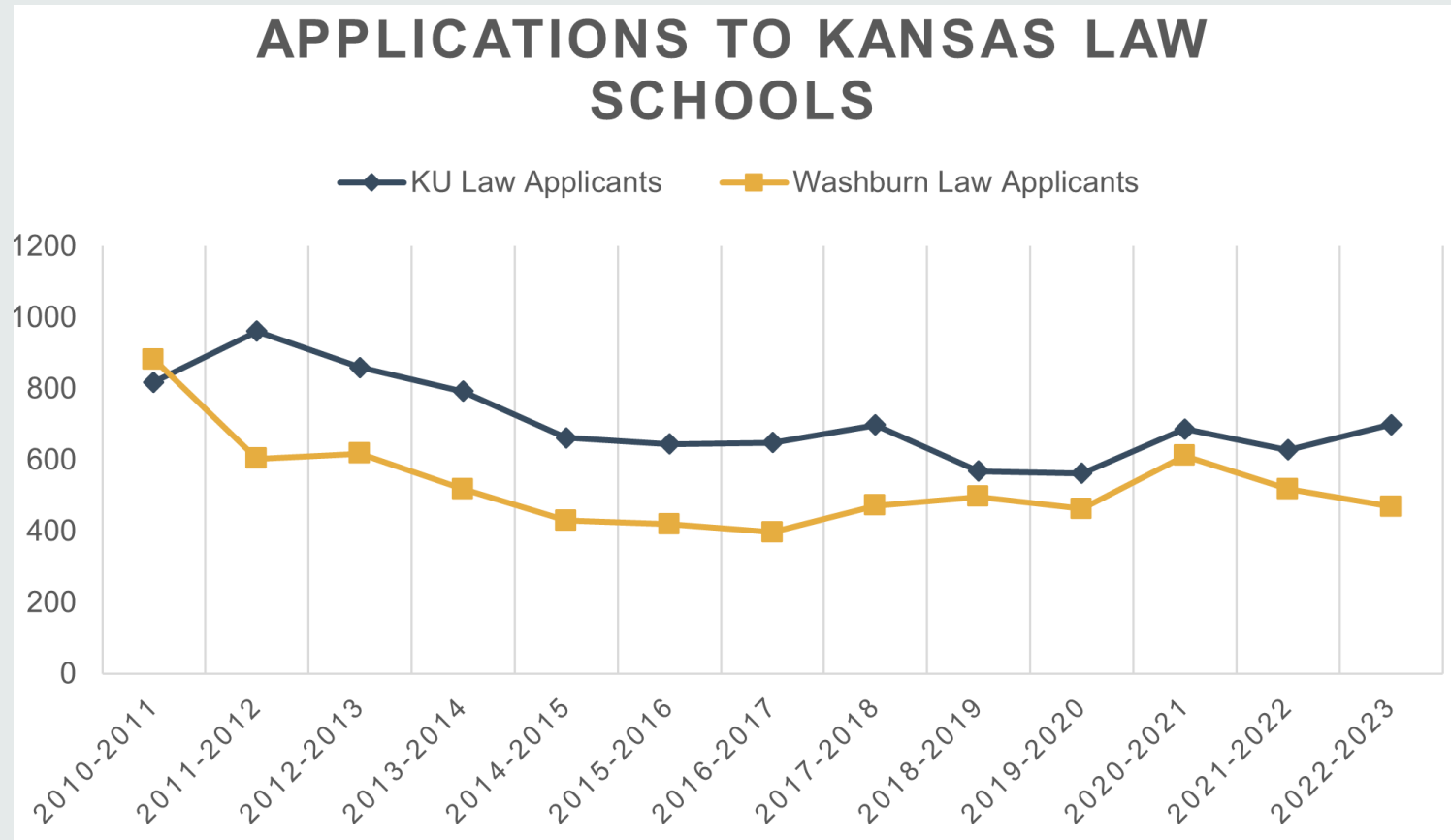


**Attorneys per 1,000 residents
(with attorneys over age 60 removed)**

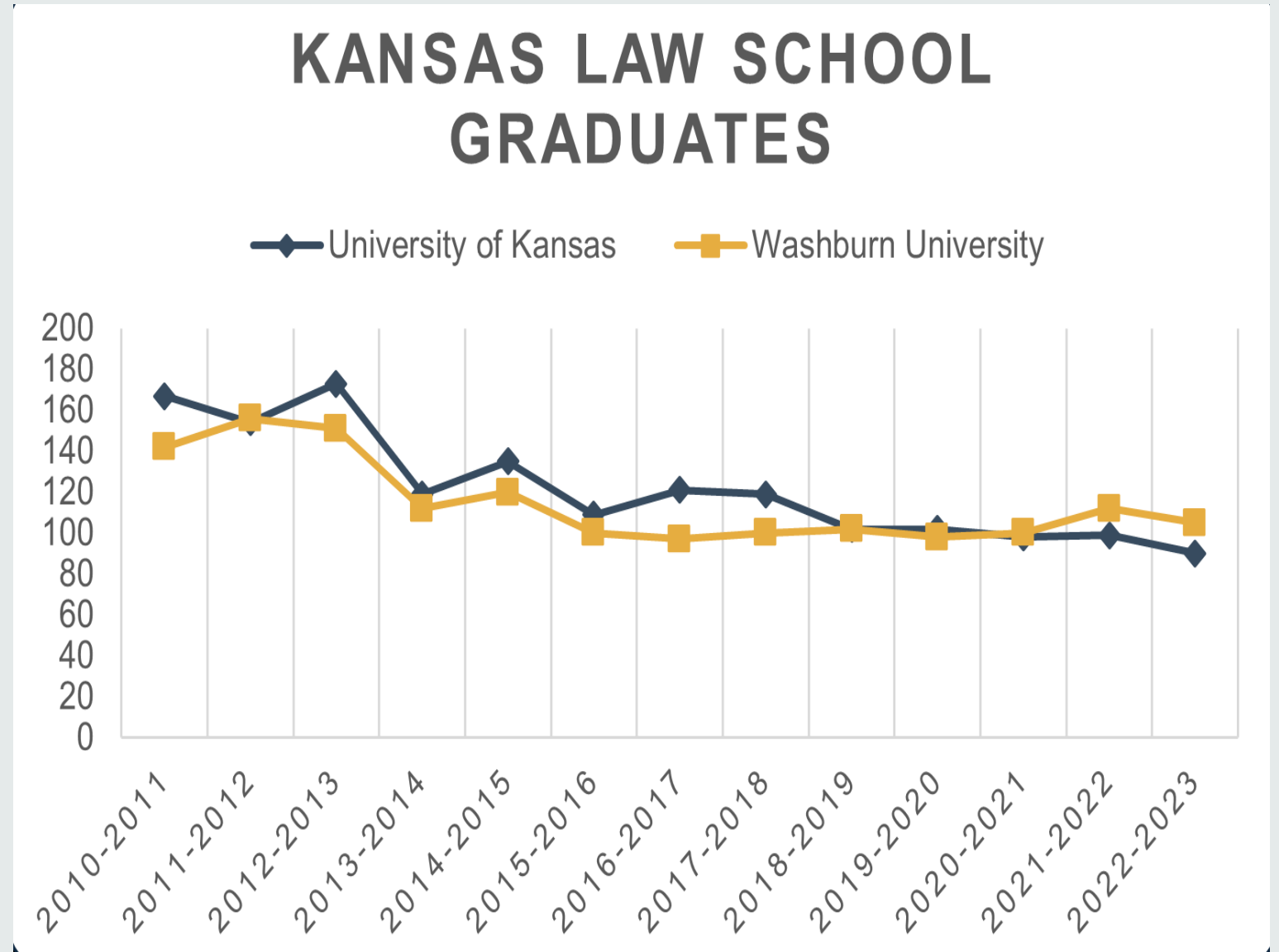
Number of Attorneys Admitted in Kansas



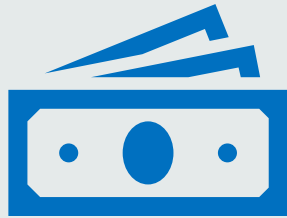
Application Volume at Kansas Law Schools



Law School Graduation Volume in Kansas



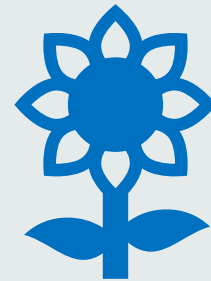
Identified Barriers



Financial



Practice



Cultural

Understanding Financial Barriers and Recommendations



Education Debt

- 74% of rural attorneys graduated with some student loan debt.
- More rural attorneys are borrowing money to finance their education.
 - Only 26% of rural attorneys who graduated before 1980 had student loan debt; whereas 93% of rural attorneys who graduated after 2011 graduated with student loan debt.
- The amount of money that rural attorneys are borrowing is significantly higher than in prior years.
 - Rural attorneys graduating before 1980 averaged \$12,200 in total debt, and rural attorneys graduating after 2011 averaged a total education debt of \$124,614.

Impact of Education Debt

- New attorneys are postponing important life events such as purchasing a home or starting a family because of education debt.
- New attorneys are also choosing jobs in urban markets that offer higher starting salaries and better benefits rather than working in a rural area where their pay may depend on production and certain benefits may not be available.



Employment Rate and Earnings

- The employment rate for the class of 2022 was the highest since 1987 at 92.1%, and KU and Washburn both exceeded this rate with KU's class at 97.9% and Washburn's class at 92.9%.
- National law firm salaries for the class of 2022 averaged \$145,400, and overall starting salaries for the class of 2022 averaging \$116,400 nationally. In Kansas, we fell short for the class of 2022 with the average law firm salary at \$78,864, and the average overall salary for the class of 2022 being \$73,003.
- Rural Kansas attorneys graduating after 2021 reported a mean salary of \$59,000.

Lack of Benefits in Rural Kansas Law Firms

Percentage of Firms Offering Employee Benefits	
Insurance	
Medical	50%
Dental	40%
Vision	30%
Life	27%
Prescription	26%
Paid Leave	
Sick	62%
Vacation	68%
Leave for the Birth or Adoption of a Child	30%
Financial Benefits	
Disability	16%
Financial and/or Retirement	49%
Education Assistance	6%
Student Loan Repayment	3%
Living Stipend	2%
Investment Opportunity	6%
Work/Life Benefits	
Wellness Program/Gym	10%
Remote Work Flexibility	28%
None of the Above	24%

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Kansas Supreme Court should collaborate with the Kansas Legislature, the University of Kansas School of Law, and Washburn University School of Law to establish a rural-attorney training program. The program should create tuition-reimbursement incentives to encourage prospectives to attend law school in Kansas and ultimately practice in rural Kansas.

Recommendation 2

The Kansas Supreme Court should work in conjunction with the Kansas legislative and executive branches to establish a student loan repayment program for attorneys living and practicing in rural Kansas.

2025 Legislative Session

SB 214

- Introduced in Senate Ways and Means Committee
- Received a hearing
- **Remains alive for consideration during the 2026 legislative session**

HB 2174

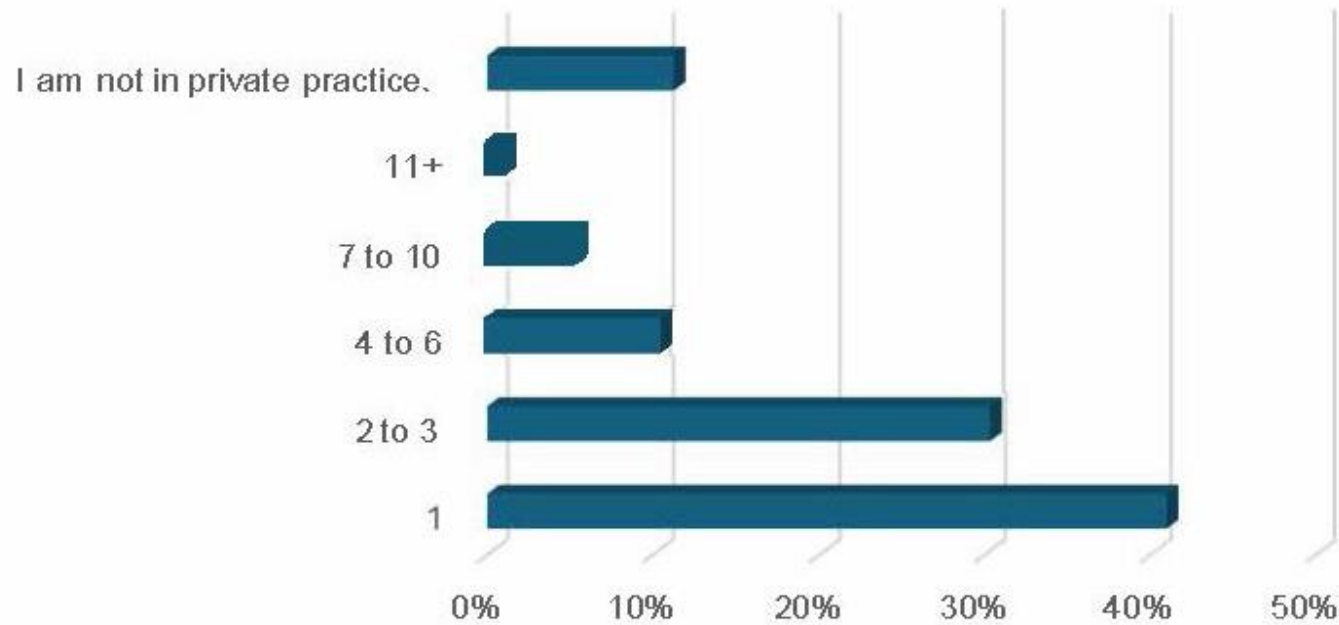
- Introduced in House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
- Received a hearing
- No action taken following the hearing and died in committee



Understanding Practice Barriers and Recommendations

Professional Isolation

Size of Law Firms and Law Offices in Rural Kansas



Lack of Business Skills

Rural Kansas attorneys spend a great deal of time managing their business and working on other non-legal tasks each week.

Hours per Week Spent on Non-Legal Tasks	Percent of Rural Kansas Attorneys
0 to 10	50%
11 to 20	38%
21 to 30	8%
31 to 40	2%
41+	2%

Challenges and Gaps in Recruitment

- Law students reported a lack of rural firms at on-campus-interviews.
- Attorneys practicing in rural law firms noted the significant time and resource investment necessary to participate in on-campus-interviews with little return.



Misperceptions About the Availability and Type of Work

- Because law students are not being exposed to the realities of rural practice, they often do not know that there is a diverse, intellectually challenging, and profitable work available to them in rural Kansas
- 57% of rural Kansas attorneys turn away clients 1 to 5 times per week; 24% of rural attorneys turn away clients 6 to 10 times per week
- The most common reasons given for turning away clients are (1) the issue is outside the attorney's area of expertise, (2) lack of time to handle the issue, and (3) conflict of interest.

Area of Law	Percent of Attorneys
Administrative	12%
Bankruptcy	4%
Business	43%
Civil Litigation	43%
Criminal	55%
Education	9%
Elder	25%
Estate Planning	54%
Employment	12%
Environmental	3%
Family	44%
Government	26%
Health	5%
Immigration	1%
In-House Counsel	6%
Intellectual Property	1%
Oil & Gas	18%
Personal Injury	15%
Real Estate	48%
Tax	8%

Practice Areas for Rural Kansas Attorneys

Recommendations

3: The Kansas Supreme Court should support efforts to develop a professional organization for rural attorneys to collaborate on issues relating to the recruitment and retention of attorneys in rural Kansas.

4: The Rural Justice Initiative Committee should transition from an ad hoc committee to a standing committee. The standing committee can facilitate implementation of approved recommendations, monitor results, and continue to study trends and developments relevant to rural justice and attorney shortages in Kansas.

Recommendations

5: The Kansas Supreme Court should direct the Office of Judicial Administration to consider the needs of rural jurisdictions in developing and executing projects and resources. The Office of Judicial Administration should dedicate staff to focus on rural-justice initiatives, develop comprehensive practice forms and other resources to aid rural attorneys in their practice, and assist other organizations committed to similar objectives.

6: The Kansas Supreme Court should collaborate with the Kansas Department of Commerce and its Office of Rural Prosperity to highlight resources available to help attorneys manage their business.

Understanding Cultural Barriers and Recommendations



Lack of Resources

- Law students at both KU and Washburn identified a lack of resources as a significant barrier to practicing in rural Kansas.
 - Housing
 - Childcare
 - Healthcare
 - Education
 - Amenities and leisure activities
 - Other professionals
- Attorneys share these concerns with all rural Kansans.



Cultural Myths



- Many young rural Kansans have been told that to be successful they need to leave their home community and pursue a profession elsewhere. We must redefine this definition of success.
- Law students report that when they express an interest in rural practice they are asked why or told they are too smart for rural practice. We must stop sending the message that rural Kansas is less than.

RECOMMENDATIONS 7 – 10

The Kansas Supreme Court should...

7: Support civics education programming and outreach efforts for K-12 students in rural Kansas.

8: Encourage pre-law programming and rural outreach efforts at Kansas universities.

9: Support opportunities for outreach in rural Kansas communities while students are in law school.

10: Encourage rural attorneys to collaborate with other professionals in grassroots efforts to support and sustain Kansas communities.

“There will
come a time
when you
believe
everything is
finished. Yet
that will be the
beginning.” —
Louis L’Amour



Questions

Laurel.KleinSearles@kscourts.gov

<https://kscourts.gov/About-the-Courts/Court-Administration/Committees/Kansas-Rural-Justice-Initiative-Committee>